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ABSTRACT

With the increasing amount of leisure time people are facing due to shorter work weeks and longer life spans, there is a growing need for public agencies to offer fulfilling leisure time activities to its community members, as well as teach them how to use this time appropriately. The YMCAs, (Young Men's Christian Association), and YM-YWHAs (Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association), which exist in many communities, are agencies which could answer to these needs. This paper describes the YM-YWHA of metropolitan New Jersey (West Orange), an existing Y which, according to the author, satisfies the needs of its community. This description covers staffing, policy, and programs (recreational and educational) and activities for different age groups (children, teenagers, adults, including elder adults). Also discussed are some of the problems and future goals of the Ys today. It is suggested that perhaps some of the programs and philosophies described could be adapted by other Ys in an attempt to make their association an agency which offers the best in leisure time activities. (Author/WL)

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THE ROLE OF THE "Y" AS A LEISURE EDUCATION ORGANIZATION

by

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing amount of leisure time people are facing today due to shorter work weeks and longer life spans, there is a growing need for public agencies to offer fulfilling leisure time activities to its community members as well as teach them how to use this time appropriately. The YMCAs, YWCAs, and YM-YWHAs which exist in many communities, are agencies which could answer to these needs. Following is a description of an existing Y which does satisfy the needs of its community and an explanation as to how it succeeds in this endeavour. Also discussed are some of the problems and future goals of the Ys today. Perhaps some of the programs and philosophies used by the model Y could be adopted by other Ys in an attempt to make their association an agency which offers the best in leisure time activities.

THE ROLE OF THE "Y" AS A LEISURE EDUCATION ORGANIZATION

The amount of time that the average individual spends working has decreased. Our highly mechanized and computerized society has caused increases in productivity, which has shortened the amount of time an individual has to spend on a particular job. As a result, people are now faced with shorter work weeks and thus an increased amount of time which can be used to suit their individual needs. The dilemma which has occurred from the excess amount of free time is that many people do not know what to do with it or how to handle it in a worthwhile manner.

Leisure time is valuable time; it compensates for pressures which an individual is placed under every day, and it provides a time when balance and harmony for the body and the mind can be attained. Therefore, how it is used affects an individual's self-concept and life in general. Studies have shown that many problems an individual may have are nothing more than emotional upsets due to a lack of meaningful and satisfying activities to enrich their lives. This however, may not be the fault of the individual. Many people do not enjoy their leisure time simply because they do not know what to do with it or do not realize its value.

The initial need for leisure time activities is not a new phenomenon. People have always tried to find new ways to utilize their free time. In 1844, for example, an Englishman by the name of George Williams began what is now known as the Young Men's Christian Association. He joined in with several other men to form a group to combat the idleness of young businessmen and to provide a place where fellowship and a wholesome atmosphere would serve as an alternative to the more negative influences found in the city of London.

This association and its philosophies became popular and spread throughout Europe, to Australia, and in 1851 to the United States. The function of the Y changed with the needs of the people. During wartime, for example, it gave relief and organized athletic contests, lectures and prayer meetings.

Christian women also felt a need for a unifying organization. In 1855 the Young Women's Christian Association was formed when two groups merged together; the Prayer Union (which was formed to safeguard the spiritual welfare of Christian women) and the General Female Training Institute (which was used as a home for nurses returning from the Crimean War). During the last two decades of the 19th century, the YWCA grew in importance, offering not only physical education, but revolutionary for the time, offered classes in sewing, typing, bookkeeping, science, music and penmanship.

A similar organization was established to serve the needs of the Jewish population. Various community organizations were formed throughout the United States to provide mental, moral, spiritual, social and physical growth for Jewish men. It was formally established in New York City by Dr. Simeon Newton Leo, on March 22, 1874. The Young Men's Hebrew Association, like the YMCA, became very popular and it was very much needed. It fulfilled a need by giving men a place to go and something to do during leisure time. Its importance was recognized by prominent financiers like Jacob Schiff and Joseph M. Proskauer as a social service and recreational institution. Its facilities were used for World War II veterans, and it sponsored leisure time recreation for the elderly. In 1888, an auxiliary for women was established as the Young Women's Hebrew Association, and in 1945 it merged with the YMHA to become what is now known as the YM-YWHA.

The need for a community organization where people could come together, feel they belong and have constructive and enjoyable activities to do during their free time was evident by the establishment and immediate popularity of the Ys. Today these associations are found in many communities in the United States as well as around the world. The World Alliance of YMCAs, for example, has some 12,000 YMCA centers in 88 countries. Focusing on the Ys in the United States and considering the increasing amount of leisure time, longer life spans, and the growing complexity of the American society, the responsibilities of the Y as an organization designed to serve the needs of its community has grown. Many Ys are finding that it is a very difficult undertaking to be able to successfully fulfill those needs considering the availability of a committed staff and how much the Y can offer in terms of programs.

One community has succeeded in this endeavour, and perhaps some of the philosophies and activities which are discussed in this article and have been proven worthwhile and successful by this Y can be used by other Ys in the hope of making their institution a viable place for enriching the lives of its attendees. A description of its programs follows.

The YM-YWHA of Metropolitan New Jersey, located on Northfield Avenue in West Orange, is a social work, educational and cultural arts agency which deals with the utilization of leisure time by its membership and community. As Mr. Mark Rubin, Assistant Executive Director of the Y stated; One of the main objectives of the Y is "to prepare people for the future in terms of their use of leisure time." The programs which are offered are a means by which this objective is accomplished.

Most programs for children and young adults revolve around them making their own decisions as to what they would like to do. As Mr. Rubin pointed

out; "The key is not necessarily what kind of activity they come up with, but rather that they play a major role in the decision-making process. That people have to learn how to make decisions about their leisure time is an important ingredient of the Y's service to its members." The Y accomplished this by acting as the facilitator and mediator, by providing the tools and the expertise, and by offering a large variety of programs. In this way an individual has the opportunity to discover his likes and dislikes as well as his strengths and his weaknesses. With the aid of a well-trained and dedicated social work and recreational staff, this is done quite successfully. The Y has 45 full-time professional staff members; 13 of which have Masters Degrees in Social Work, and three of which are professional recreational coordinators. Many part-time group leaders hold special programs and workshops in their area of specialization, and volunteers serve on many committees, aiding the professional staff in programs and administrative activities.

Leisure education should start with the young child, when creativity and open-mindedness are not yet stiffled. At the Y, pre-school schildren can become involved in this education by means of a warm, friendly atmosphere where the development of relationships and experiences outside of the home are made. Children can participate in music, crafts and story telling sessions, where they can learn basic skills by random exploration in their area of interest. Music, for example is learned through rhythmic and melodic activities with the aid of rhythm-band instruments, the voice and body movement. Simple crafts are made from a variety of media such as paints, crayons, paper mache, clay and water, giving young children their first hands-on experiences in creativity. Group interaction and creativity are emphasized in the learning of basic techniques. In this way, children are given the opportunity to experiment and

discover particular interests or talents which can be developed and enjoyed throughout their lives.

When children enter grade school, they are for the first time confronted with limited amounts of responsibilities, decision-making as well as socialization experiences. This period of growth should be positive and enjoyable for the children. The Y tries to accomodate to this necessity by its comfortable and informal settings where the children can have fun and at the same time learn to adjust to the new process of socialization.

The grade school program consists of approximately seventy different groups which are held after school, in the evenings and on weekends, when free time is usually most abundant. They are all designed to stimulate particular interests of the children. Classes range from arts and crafts, cooking, fine arts workshops, and science games to friendship clubs, and Jewish-oriented clubs. Many of the group activities are an extension of the pre-school groups, to further develop skills, talents or interests which may have already been discovered. Music, for example, is taken a step further, where melodic instruments are introduced. The xylophone, piano and instruments children make themselves are used in improvizations. Body movement is further explored where emphasis is on freedom and joy in moving the body.

Making the Y a desireable place for teenagers to come to is an important responsibility which the Y realizes. Teens need an alternative to the home and school where they can go to spend their leisure time. Many teens lack interesting or worthwhile activities in which they can take part after school and on the weekends, which can result in boredome and even juvenile delinquency in some cases. Teenages desire to be an acceptable member of their peer group and most important to have a place with a safe environment where each individual is accepted for

what he or she is. These needs are important, especially to adolescents who experience some difficult adjustments both physically and emotionally. Realizing the importance of providing for these needs, Mr Israel Yanoff, Group Work Supervisor the the Junior High Department stated that the program "emphasizes group-related activities and the development of group interaction, and relationships, encouraging kids who have trouble socializing, family problems, encouraging kids who want to start a new type of group, build on Jewish identity and social service (work for the community)."

As an attempt to meet these needs, the Y offers group activities which emphasize development of relationships and positive group interaction through activities such as weaving, photography, judo, modern dance classes, a newspaper club and a textile workshop. The Y encourages children to attend programs by providing good publicity, advertising in local newspapers and mailing fliers. Telephone calls are made inviting particular children who may have socialization problems or would be an asset to the group. These activities are perpetuated so that the children can be stimulated into discovering new areas of interest and in developing skills and talents. The goal of the Y is to make it THE hang-out for all teenagers in the community, for at such an institution children can learn what to do with their free time and enjoy what they are doing in a healthy and pleasant environment.

Children entering the ninth grade can become a part of the Senior High Program. Avi Lewinson, Group Work Supervisor for that department believes that "The high schoolers are probably the most difficult of the age groups to draw into the center because there are so many other programs offered to them outside of the Y." Therefore, the Y must provide programs which will interest the teenagers and which they will actively feel a part of.

There are approximately 350 to 400 teenagers in the program. The program is divided into two areas; special interest groups (which have approximately 150 participants) and social clubs (which have approximately 250 participants). Special interest groups include activities such as fishing, skiing, gourmet cooking, introduction to auto mechanics, juggling and the like. These clubs offer its members something which they want to learn as well as a chance for social interaction. Social clubs primarily emphasize the socialization aspect of leisure time which is so important to these youngsters (evidenced by the large number of participants). The Y accomodates for the two largest national Jewish youth organizations; B'nai B'rith Girls and AZA (for boys). These organizations offer a wide variety of activities including social gatherings, athletics, community services and religious projects. All activities are for the purpose of meeting other Jewish teenagers and having fun. They plan their own trips and activities with the help of group leaders and advisors who set up guide lines, help in the implementation of programs and give advice. This satisfies the Y's desire to teach its members how to plan their own leisure time activities and provides the facilities where this can be accomplished.

Adults come to the Y for a number of reasons; for relaxation after a hard day's work, to make new friends, to put variety into their lives, to get physical exercize, to learn a new skill and more. There are social groups where adults come together for purely social reasons, and there are leisure time and self-awareness groups where adults learn a skill or about themselves.

Adults come to the Y for a social experience - to meet people of the same age and interest. Mrs. Rhoda Goodman, Coordinator of the Adult and Family Services believes that "there is a great need that people are feeling now in

terms of the alienation that has really existed in our society for a long time. People want to learn how to redevelop intimate relationships." This problem directly relates to how people use their leisure time in that it is during leisure time when such relationships can be made. Proof of this need can be seen by the number of people involved in social group activities at the Y, which numbers approximately 400 individuals in any given week. Leisure time and self-awareness classes serve approximately 200 individuals in any given semester.

Social groups are categorized according to age and need. Singles groups range from the age of 18 to 60 years of age. There is an 18 to 24 years singles group, and a 24 to 35 years group, most of whom were never married. They come together to meet the opposite sex through various kinds of social programs ranging from dances and coffeehouses to discussion groups. The 26 to 40 year old group is made up of single parents who come together to learn to deal with their problems and well as to socialize. There is also a 35 and over age group, mostly single through divorce, separation or death of a spouse. They have grown children and have found themselves alone, feeling rejected, useless or bored. In an informal, nonthreatening atmosphere where cultural programs, skill development and social interaction are offered, these people can find their worth as human beings. They get together to discuss topics related to their lives, like divorce, dating and family problems, and they can participate in such activities as modern dance workshops, jewelry-making, sculpture, painting, and educational courses. Many of the adults find, by attending programs at the Y that there are plenty of other people besides their families with whom they can develop close and lasting relationships. Many build their lives around the programs at the Y, going out before or after a program as well as being together during the programs. All these leisure time activities

have done these people a tremendous amount of good.

There are also activities for married couples to engage in. They too are searching for enjoyable leisure time experiences and for intimate relationships with whom they can identify and have fun. The Y offers social gatherings such as a night in the gym, swim nights and folk dancing specifically for these couples. The couples also plan short-term and long-term trips.

A very serious problem existing in our society today is the disintegration of family life. Trying to restore and unify the family, the Y organizes programs in which the entire family participates together. Holiday workshops, where families participate as a unit are quite popular. The Hannukah workshop, held in 1976 included 25 to 30 couples, or approximately 65 people. They cooked special holiday dishes and participated in games and storytelling. There are also family trips and weekly family days where they have the opportunity to come together and use the Y facilities.

The Y has provisions for all members of society. It offers programs for not only people of all ages and interests, but also for those who have special disabilities. Modified programs are set up for special individuals to encourage adjustment and development in areas of skills, socialization and physical fitness. A modified arts and crafts club, for example, gives those children with learning disabilities and other special needs an opportunity to make a variety of arts and crafts projects. Socialization is encouraged with emphasis on fine motor coordination for teens with neurological impairment. They play ping pong, use the gym facilities, have group discussions and take part in other special activities.

The Y places a great amount of emphasis on the elderly in the community.

Due to the American society's attitude towards the elderly, people grow older sooner than they like to realize. This is partly because of physiological reasons, but mainly because our society makes people mentally older than they really are. Many elderly people are ignored or forgotten about and are regarded as being too old to be capable of doing things or thinking for themselves. A common attitude is: "They lived their lives, now let me live mine." Because of such attitudes, leisure time can be a killer for senior citizens. Loneliness and boredom are often unbearable situations which they must live with. The Y helps those who have been out of contact with society to become active again by finding new types of experiences for them to enjoy. It is very difficult for anyone who has been away from other people for a long time to join in again. But with the large senior citizens program available, and a competent, committed staff, many of these people find that they too have a place in society. This realization helps them make new friends with whom they can spend their leisure time. College courses are offered as are exercise and swimming classes. They plan their own trips to New York City and overseas. According to Mr. Mark Rubin, Assistant Executive Director of the Y, "New kinds of things are happening now ... there are discussion groups in terms of sexuality, problems with sexuality, women's conscienceness sessions, which are new to them, that they hear about, but don't (would otherwise) have a chance to discuss." These people can also participate in dance programs, physical fitness, and swimming, which are specifically designed for their age group. The senior citizen program is both fruitful and beneficial for the elderly, and should be adopted by every community in the United States.

Besides having age-related groups, the Y has two other departments which are separate entities, but which everyone of all ages can take part in. These are the Cultural Arts and the Physical Education Departments. While the age-related groups use skills and other activities as a means of achieving positive social interaction, the Cultural Arts Department views the arts and skill development as an end. The aim of the Cultural Arts Department as stated in their 1970 "Report of the Cultural Arts Committee for Self-Study," is to "enrich the lives of those who participate and enlarge the experience of both adults and children who expose themselves to its programs. The Cultural Arts Department especially wants to open the door to that which is promising among the new and unproven in art, music, drama and dance ... While the basic purpose of the Cultural Arts class program is to serve the membership, the public program should be planned to interest and serve the general community."

The courses offered in this department are educational and serious in nature and range from physically passive to physically active entertainment. Passive entertainment includes attending concerts, movies, lectures, demonstrations and art exhibits. The active programs physically involve the participants in music, creative movement, dance techniques, painting, sculpting, etc. Emphasis is placed on the development and perfection of a particular skill and it is attended because of the desire to learn the particular skill offered.

The self-study suggests that perhaps an exciting cultural arts program can fill a void which many people of today are feeling and searching to fill. The Y tries to provide programs which can serve the community at large, as an alternative to traveling to New York City, so that the artistic quality of the programs must be the very best. It has been the Y's obligation as a community agency to explore and encourage the arts because directly or indirectly they affect the

lives of its participants, for the arts can be an enriching, stimulating and enjoyable way of using one's leisure time.

The Physical Education Department emphasizes physical fitness and health. A tremendous amount of people use the gym facilities which the Y has. The large gym contains six baskets and gymnastic apparatus such as trampolines, mats, unevens, etc. An exercise room is fully equipped with exercise equipment. There is a health club for both females and males, with three masseurs, a sauna and a steamroom. The large, heated indoor pool serves those members who wish to swim for leisure or who wish special instruction. Swim classes vary from beginning swimming lessons to water ballet and scuba diving.

Some of the classes are categorized according to age. For the pre-school child, there are obstacle courses, mats, hoops, a jungle gym, and a trampoline where motor coordination can be developed. Teens can participate in competitive and non-competitive sports, gymnastics, archery, paddleball, handball, tennis and of course swimming. For those with special disabilities, modified sports, games, swimming and exercise classes are given, with individualized attention and supervision. Many adults are active in this department as well. An adult slimnastic course is designed for those who want to tone their muscles, as is the aqua-slim course where exercises are done in water. An adult fitness program serves those who want to get into shape in terms of endurance and flexibility. For those who have had heart surgery, there is a special cardiac rehabilitation and conditioning program, and there are plans for a post mastectomy course where physical exercise and discussion groups will attempt to help in physical and emotional adjustment. The aim of this department is to present not only enjoyable and social experiences for those involved, but also to make the participants aware of the importance of good health and physical fitness.

This is only a brief description of what the Metropolitan YM-YWHA has to offer its members and the community as a fulfillment of leisure time activities. How does this Y know what to offer, what programs to alter, what to emphasize, and why is this Y such a successful community agency? The answer has to do with commitment. The Y has a committed staff who work well beyond the 40 hours expected of them. They confer with committees of lay-people who establish policies and offer feedback as to what the community wants and needs in terms of programming. New programs are derived from such committees and from personal suggestions made to the Y staff by its members and by the community. This good communication flow between the community and the staff, and the responsibility the staff feels it has in terms of answering the needs of the community are what makes this Y a successful and popular place in which to spend leisure time.

There are many Ys throughout the United States which are having difficulties in sustaining themselves as agencies to serve the community as far as providing needed programming, obtaining staff, volunteers and membership is concerned. In an "overview" concerning their Six Year Operating Goals, Robert W. Harlan, Ph.D., and Executive Director of the National Board of YMCAs, revealed some of the uncertainties facing the Ys today.

Evidence indicates that the policy of the Ys must be broad and flexible in order to be a multipurpose human care agency serving all people of all ages. The economy is of course not helping the situation. Obtaining public funds in future years is questionable considering our unstable economy. There is a drastic decrease in the number of young adults who are joining the Y. The Y is concerned about this because it is the young sector of the population which

has a significant influence on the social consciousness of the organization. Similarly, the number of professional staff working at the Ys has decreased. The uncertainties of how to deal with these problems and their causes are being investigated and remedies as the following evidence will indicate.

The YMCA's membership is increasing. The number of members in 1974 exceeded 8.7 million. Adding to that figure are those people who use the Y facilities but are not members, brings the total to 9 million in 1974. The health and physical education programs continue to thrive. Those active in the physical education activites account for 63% of all groups. The "Y Indian Guides", which is a program where fathers spend a few hours each month with his children in fun and fellowship activities is steadily growing. The YMCA Campers have increased 136% in the last decade to 1.2 million in 1974. And, in 1974, 17 new YMCAs joined the National Movement.

Active attempts are being made by the Ys to meet the needs of the people in their community so that the Y will be a popular place in which to spend leisure time. New programming which is aimed at strengthening family units and providing alternatives to environments which breed alienation and delinquency is being devised. Programs for unwed pregnant teenagers, large after school programs including tutoring in educational courses, recreational classes with a wider scope of activities, a career and service-oriented teenage program aimed at improving self-image are some of the goals of the YWCA located in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The YWCA of Plainfield, New Jersey offers self-defense, belly dancing, weaving, soft-scultpure, and pottery, which are courses that deviate from the traditional policy of the Y. The YMCA of Fanwood-Scotch Plains, New Jersey is becoming a family-oriented agency where banquets and special events are held for the entire family. At this Y, adults can attend parent education

classes, behavior modification, bridge, religious courses, and reading improvement classes as well as participating in a cardiovascular testing program.

The Ys are trying to break away from traditional policies and programs as evidenced by the variety of programs the Ys offer now and hope to offer in the future. However, this is only the beginning. The Y should not only be a building where people come together during their leisure time, but it should also be a place where people can LEARN how to use their leisure time. What is needed is a committed staff, as well as community and membership support. A strong publicity campaign to inform the community that the Y does exist as a facility for the community is imperative. As seen by the brief description of the Y of Metropolitan New Jersey, the Y has unlimited potential as an agency that can serve its community in terms of spiritual fulfillment, education, and enjoyment. Continued effort on the part of all Ys and the people they serve, will enhance the lives of its participants by making leisure time a fruitful and worthwhile experience.

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